

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Wind in the Willows (Unabridged)

by
Kenneth Grahame

Book Information

Kenneth Grahame, The Wind in the Willows
(Unabridged)

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305 Pages

Book Level: 8.2

Interest Level: MG

Ratty, Mole, Badger, and Toad have adventures on the river, wild times in the Wild Wood, and high jinks on the open road.

Award: SLJ Best Book

Topics: Animals, Frogs/Toads; Animals, Rats; Classics, Classics (All); Power Lessons AR, Grade 8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Series, Puffin Classics; What Kids Are Reading, 2014, 75 Most Read Fiction, ATOS Book Levels 7.0-10.0

Main Characters

Badger a wise creature who feels out of place in Society

Mole a sensitive, apprehensive, and loyal creature who leaves his home and learns more about life outside his burrow

Otter a fun-loving fellow river dweller

Toad an irresponsible braggart given to excesses and then moods of despair

Water Rat a good-natured and socially outgoing creature who befriends Mole

Vocabulary

chivvying chasing

copses thickets of small trees or shrubs

paroxysm a sudden outburst of action or emotion

querulous given to complaining

stoat an ermine weasel in its brown coat

weir a dam placed across the water

Synopsis

While spring cleaning, Mole catches spring fever, leaves his home, and wanders. Upon reaching the River, he spies Water Rat, who invites Mole to visit. Rat packs a picnic lunch, and they head out for a river excursion. Rat informs Mole of the ways of the river and its inhabitants, refers to the Wild Wood and hints of its dangers, and speaks of the Wide World, which is no place for respectable animals. Rat mentions Badger, who could teach Mole a lot, but whom nobody bothers. While rowing home, Mole overturns the boat, but Rat is a forgiving creature and the two became fast friends. That summer, Rat teaches Mole to row, swim, and listen to the music in the reeds.

One day, they go to Toad Hall to visit Toad, a wealthy and irresponsible chap who chases one fad after another. Toad persuades Rat and Mole to join him on the open road in a gipsy caravan. They are soon run off the road by a motor-car, whereupon Toad becomes fascinated with this new invention and decides to buy the fastest car he can.

When winter approaches and Mole still has not met Badger, he takes to the Woods alone where he gets lost. Rat finds him and together they stumble upon Badger's home, where they are welcomed. They inform Badger of Toad's antics and accidents, and Badger promises to attend to Toad at the proper time. The winter passes and includes a visit to Mole's burrow when he is overcome with homesickness.

In the early summer, Badger appears at Rat's house, ready to confront Toad. Toad's resistance is so great that the group locks him in his room and plans to guard him until he comes to his senses. Toad slips out the window, however, and steals a motor car to escape. He is arrested and sentenced to prison for twenty years. He is not rueful for long, though, and with the help of the jailer's daughter, he escapes from prison disguised as a washerwoman.

During this time, Mole and Rat learn the meaning of the wind's song. It holds a message of awe and peace, followed by forgetfulness as of a forgotten dream. Later, a seafaring Rat passes through and

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Rat is tempted to explore the Wide World, but Mole brings him back to the reality of the River.

Meanwhile, while pursuing a homeward course, Toad narrowly escapes recapture while traveling by train, barge, and motor-car. Rat rescues Toad from the river and tells Toad that Toad Hall has been taken over by weasels and stoats in his absence. Badger knows about a secret passage under Toad Hall, and the four friends sneak up on the unsuspecting intruders and banish them from the premises. They celebrate the victory with a banquet.

In the end, dignity is restored to the river inhabitants. Toad is made to repay his debts of gratitude, and the Wild Wood is no longer a fearsome place.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

At the end of the story, it was said that mothers of unruly children would threaten them by saying Mr. Badger would "up and get them." Why did he have this reputation?

In a sense, Badger did "up and get" Toad. Toad was acting unruly, and Badger gave up his retirement and emerged from his home in order to get Toad back in line. Badger seemed to take on the role of watchdog for the animal code of etiquette. So, if a child was unruly (breaking the behavior code), Badger was the natural choice to be named disciplinarian.

Literary Analysis

What was Kenneth Grahame's purpose in writing this book?

The book could be read as a pure work of fantasy, simply for the entertainment of the reader. However, there are underlying currents of satire--both of human personality types, and of friction between social classes.

Inferential Comprehension

How does Mole change from the beginning to the end of the story?

Mole seems quite provincial when he first emerges from his underground home. He is awed by all around him, naively explores areas alone, becomes frightened, and is easily "taken in" by Toad's promises of a grand adventure. By the end of the book, however, Mole has gained a range of experiences and is able to see more clearly the true nature of his fellow creatures. Instead of being a follower, he takes the initiative and thwarts the new residents of Toad Hall by trickery and cannot be fooled by Toad as easily.

Constructing Meaning

Reputation seems important to Badger, since he does not want people forming a bad opinion of animals because of Toad's behavior. Is your reputation important to you? If so, how?

Answers will vary. Young people may say reputation has little importance, since they may believe youth is a time for trying new things, and judging people or labeling them is wrong. Others may feel that reputation has value and that they should be protective of theirs. In the story, the reader can see both a positive and negative reputation was valued; Badger valued the positive while Toad, the negative (He wanted a treacherous reputation upon his escape from prison.) Reputations do follow people, and others are attracted or repelled by them.

Teachable Skills

Describing Actions or Events Mole and Rat have a mystical experience as they approach the weir and when they alight on the island. The experience is both aural and visual. People from all over the world, from all faiths, and many walks of life have had such mystical experiences. Choose a well-documented vision or miracle and research it. How was the person changed after experiencing it? What form did the experience take? Were there witnesses? How did the people

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of that time and locale receive the reporting of the vision? Share your findings.

Understanding Sequence Some events occur simultaneously with others in the book, but because of the episodic nature of the story, appear to happen sequentially. Make a time-line for the story, paying particular attention to the simultaneous occurrence of events. Look for times in the book in which one character might be the center of focus, and yet events are happening with other characters. For example, Toad was thrown in jail and only later found out what had happened during his incarceration.

Recognizing Setting Grahame paints an idyllic picture of life on the river in his book. Have the students research the changes that were occurring in British life around the turn of the twentieth century. They should research industrial, demographic, transportation, and economic issues. Comment on how these changes affected the genteel society of the countryside west of London on the Thames. Decide if the picture of River life in *The Wind in the Willows* is idealistic or realistic.

Comparing and Contrasting A. A. Milne, the author of *Winnie the Pooh*, wrote a play titled *Toad of Toad Hall*, based on Kenneth Grahame's classic. Have the students compare the play to the novel. What changes were made in order to dramatize the tale? Is the play truthful in detail or tone? If time allows, students may wish to rehearse and perform one of the acts or scenes in the play, or perhaps do a reader's theater production.